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ABSTRACT

This document describes the social conditions and problems faced by immigrants arriving in the United States a century ago, and relates these problems to current conditions confronting recent immigrants. This comparison suggests that social conditions haven't changed as much as they should have. The discrepancy between immigrant needs and the expectations of American society are highlighted, focusing on basic injustices in the social and economic system and stereotypes and other cultural misunderstandings faced by immigrants. An appeal is made for helping this population by giving meaning to the incoherence of the social system they encounter, by providing them with a sense of history, by making them aware of the positive contributions of previous immigrant groups, and by confronting social problems. (MSE)

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Conference Opening Session: Panel on "The New Immigrants"

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Asian Americans for Equality

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DORIS W. KOO
Asian Americans for Equality

Conference Opening Session: Panel on "The New Immigrants"

I'd like to begin the presentation by reading from an essay by Jeffrey Scheuer, *Legacy of Light*, written in commemoration of the 100th year celebration of University Settlement, the oldest settlement house in New York City.

> Cast yourself back in time to New York City of the late 19th century. Imagine you are standing on the Brooklyn Bridge, the latest marvel of American engineering, looking westward toward Manhattan on a warm summer evening. As the sun goes down and the lights of the city begin to twinkle, you notice a curious void in the skyline: a whole section of the shoreline, beginning just north of the far end of the bridge and extending uptown for about a mile, remains dark. This dark area is the Lower East Side. Although it has no electricity—and no public parks—the neighborhood contains the densest crowding of human habitation anywhere in the world.
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> Crossing the bridge and walking north on Eldridge or Allen Street, you would be vaulted into a city within a city, where the sounds of Russian, German, and Yiddish are heard; where a pungent smell of vegetables fills the heavy, stale air. The narrow streets are crowded and noisy, with pedestrian traffic, pushcarts, and horse-drawn wagons competing for room on the muddy cobble. Surrounding on all sides are dark, shabby tenements, five and six storey walk-ups, most of them without plumbing.
>
> Reaching Delancey Street, you would find people sleeping in the grassed enclosures dividing that boulevard: whole families have brought their bedding here to escape the stifling heat and crowding of the tenements. Others are sleeping on fire escapes.

Most of these people were immigrant Jews from Eastern Europe: Rumania, Hungary, and the Russian pale. And in some respect, they had never known such freedom. In Russia, for example, the Jews—when not actually massacred in pogroms—were confined to the towns of the western pale; they could not own or deal in real estate, hold public office, or work for the Czarist government, even as common laborers; and they were allowed very limited educational opportunities.

But they did not easily adapt to the chaotic freedoms of the New World, and disillusionment was common: they found, not milk and honey, but poverty and crime, political corruption and yellow journalism. The work available to them was menial.

Indeed, the immigrants not only lived in squalor, but worked in it as well. With the labor movement still in its infancy, and little government regulation, they formed a vast pool of unskilled labor for the garment industry. Working for meager wages, in crowded, uncomfortable, and dangerous sweatshops, they endured the most exploitive conditions in American history after the end of slavery, producing about half of the ready-made clothing sold in the United States.

Few of them spoke any English; and the fact that their children learned the new language more quickly only intensified the generational tensions in their culturally uprooted families. It was hardly an ideal place for a child to grow up: aside from the sweatshops and street peddlers the most ubiquitous forms of commerce in the district were saloons and houses of prostitution.

Much has changed since 1880, and yet so little was changed. The Lower East Side is still inhabited by immigrants, but instead of Russian, German and Yiddish, you will now hear Chinese, Vietnamese and Spanish. Over 100,000 Chinese still live in those dark, crowded tenements, whole families of five or six, paying one third of their family income in rent. Our streets are still filled with peddlers and vegetable stands; our parks with drugs, crime, and gangs. Over 1,000 Asian immigrants work in Chinatown sweatshops; most of them are women. They hunch over their machines for 10 hours a day, six days a week, earning as much as their hands can sew.

Just as other immigrants before them, Asians bring with them energies, strong survival instincts, and dreams for a better future. We are often considered the "model minority"—hard working, serious, and diligent in pursuing education. Newspapers tell success stories of our Westinghouse students, our Ivy League scholars, our Nobel Prize winners. Talk is made of our 24-hour Chinese take-outs, Japanese sushi, and Korean green grocers. While these are true generalizations of our communities, they tend to obscure the racial discrimination and poverty we also face. Like many ethnic communities in New York City, Asian Americans must cope with the same day to day problems of survival.

The 1980 census figures showed that there were about 80,000 Chinese living in Chinatown. Now there is an estimated 150,000. Chinatown is definitely growing—from immigration, family reunification, and others coming in search of jobs. And as it grows, there is no affordable housing to meet its demands.

At the same time, around the immediate vicinity, the financial district is encroaching. In recent years, we have seen the growth of Wall Street, the World Trade Center, and Battery Park City, which will become the future headquarters of Shearson American Express, on landfill just to the west of Chinatown in Lower Manhattan. We have the growing Lower East side, which is absorbing more and more displaced artists from the Village area, and also is becoming an area of exorbitant rents. We see the encroachment of waterfront development, the South Street Seaport, to the south of Chinatown. Basically, a community that has been situated in a location for over a hundred years is now being boxed in by a speculative real estate market, by lucrative development incentives and profit motives. And as a result of all these, housing has become an endangered species in the Chinatown community.

There are many landlords who are trying to evict their rent-controlled and rent-stabilized tenants so as to convert their apartments into cooperatives and condominiums. There are multi-million dollar developers trying to build and eyeing to tear down existing old buildings—and housing is old: about 60% of Chinatown's housing stock was built before 1901. The housing shortage is by far the most serious problem affecting Chinatown. Once there is a fire, once you are evicted, once you lose your home because of a domestic dispute, you may never find another apartment or home in Chinatown.

Another problem that has led to the growing number of homeless cases is a breakdown of social fabric among Asian families. We have seen many more incidences of domestic violence and divorce. Men as well as women are affected even though battered women are rapidly becoming a group that is in great need of social services. Because of the feudal bond that still exists within Asian families, women are not expected to complain when they are battered or abused. When they do leave, their husbands try to track them down by any means to drag them back home. So shelters for battered women as well as mental health counseling are also becoming a real urgent outcry for the Asian communities.

And then we are just hit with overall poverty and the lack of resources. Because of language problems, new immigrants do not understand what exists in the world outside of Chinatown. They do not know what help may be available or how to get it. They are forever trapped by this image of the "model minority," that you are supposed to pull yourself up by your bootstraps. Even the ones who have seemingly made it find it difficult to keep going, at the time when the "model minority" has evidently "topped out" on corporate ladders, and have reached a dead end.

This model minority image continues to be a stereotype that hides the real class division which separates the Asian community from itself, a stereotype which presents a false image that comes back to haunt us in the form of anti-Asian violence, police brutality—as in the tragic death of Vincent Chin, a 26-year-old engineer—and frequent hostilities from our own neighbors.

Recently, flyers were sent around the Bensonhurst community in Brooklyn, where most residents are Italian and Jewish. The flyers called for a total boycott of Asian families seeking to buy homes in the community, and a boycott of Asian businesses in order to prevent a take-over by the so-called "Chinese drug dealers" and "Korean Moonies."

Very often Asians are criticized for keeping to themselves, for being apolitical or anti-social. Yet at times when we do participate, when we speak out against social injustice such as police brutality or incidents such as occurred at Howard Beach, we are told to "Go back to China if you don't like it here."

I guess the paradox faced by most Asian immigrants is the promise of equal opportunity on the one hand, and the reality of hardship and non-acceptance on the other.

For the middle class and professionally educated immigrants from Asia, gaining back your former social and economic status is

not an easy task in this country. Mr. Boon, a Ph.D. chemist who worked as a researcher in a major corporation for 13 years, was abruptly fired when he asked for a promotion to a managerial position. When he filed a complaint with the company's chief executive officer or CEO, he was further blacklisted by the powerful New Jersey company. Two years later, even after a small settlement won through filing a federal discrimination lawsuit, he still could not find work in New Jersey. Last year, he finally uprooted his family and moved to the midwest.

For the poorer and less educated, immigration could mean upward mobility, or a curse. Fourteen years ago, I met a typical Chinese immigrant family in Chicago's Chinatown. The father worked as a cook in a Chinese restaurant, the mother sewed in a garment factory. They had four children. Cathy, the oldest, was nine when she arrived. Her brother, King, was seven. There were two younger sisters. Cathy couldn't speak a word of English. Neither could King. When they went to register at the local public school, they both failed the entrance exam and the IQ test. Cathy was categorized as mentally retarded and put in a slow learners' program. King was diagnosed as having learning and behavioral disabilities and was sent to a group home from which he subsequently ran away. A few years ago, I went back to visit the family. Cathy had dropped out of school when she was 14 and never finished fifth grade. She is now an obese 25-year-old who spends all day watching television. No one talks about King or where he could be, or whether he is still alive.

I feel angry every time I think about the lives of these children, lives they never had a chance to live. I feel pain when I think about their parents. I dare not think how many other families out there lived through similar experiences, how many eventually made it, and how many have given up.

We do not hear these stories too often. We do not find too many chances to tell them. Mrs. Chin raised her son, Vincent, alone after her husband died. The night before he was to be married, Vincent, an engineer, was beaten to death by two unemployed white auto workers who sought to blame him for the closing of the Detroit auto plants. In the last words to Vincent before he died one of the men, Richard Ebens, said: "You Japs are the reason we lost our jobs."

More than four years later neither Ebens or Michael Nitz has spent a single day in jail for the brutal killing of Vincent Chin. In May, 1987, a federal appeals court in Michigan overturned the conviction of the two men and acquitted them of all charges.

Is this justice in America in 1987? Or is it more the America of 1882, when the Chinese Exclusion Act and other acts of legalized racism were accepted as laws of this nation?

Our immigrants come with hope. They come with a strong motivation to succeed. What they are not prepared for is the context of the new land they are to call home. They have no sense of the larger picture they will find themselves in, and reality can be as shocking as the new culture itself.

It is this social context that we must give to our new immigrants, and to help give meaning to the seemingly incoherent things they see around them. We have to give them a sense of history, for them to respect and appreciate what other immigrants have done, the struggles they have led for a better future, the hard won fruits of success. In the same context, we must confront our social problems head on, and not for a moment give our latest priorities an illusion or a promise of paradise that we cannot deliver. They have to see, just as we do, that when our country's priorities are placed on weapons and military strength, when whole industries are allowed to die and stand idle while husbands remain unemployed, when we don't retool and rebuild our own productive capacity and instead blame third-world countries for our woes, when we allow drugs, crime, homelessness, teenage pregnancy, school dropouts, infant mortality and dilapidated housing to plague our inner city neighborhoods, then we, as educators, organizers, and social workers, whether immigrant or native born, will have to re-define our personal orientation, search for our mission, and ask how we will seek to realize our own dreams while helping the newest among us realize theirs.

As all of us recover from a bit of nostalgia during the Statue of Liberty's bicentennial celebration, let us remind ourselves of the poverty and suffering that many of our people continue to face today. And let us keep in sight the progress that still needs to be made, in order to realize our dreams.